

# CURSIVE RUSSIAN–ENGLISH HOMOGLYPHS AND HOMOGRAPHS

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Several past *Word Ways* articles [1–5] have treated the topic of Russian–English *homoglyphs*—that is, those letters of the Russian alphabet that resemble letters of the English alphabet—as well as *homographs*, the sequences of such letters that form valid words in both languages. Until now, however, these studies have dealt only with *print letterforms*—that is, the block letters of hand-written documents and the standard upright type of typeset or typewritten documents. But both Russian and English are also commonly handwritten in their respective *cursive scripts*, which are joined-up writing styles with their own distinct letterforms. The table below shows the 33 letters of the Russian alphabet, including the upper- and lowercase forms for both upright type and cursive script.<sup>1</sup>

А а	<i>А а</i>	К к	<i>К к</i>	Х х	<i>Х х</i>
Б б	<i>Б б</i>	Л л	<i>Л л</i>	Ц ц	<i>Ц ц</i>
В в	<i>В в</i>	М м	<i>М м</i>	Ч ч	<i>Ч ч</i>
Г г	<i>Г г</i>	Н н	<i>Н н</i>	Ш ш	<i>Ш ш</i>
Д д	<i>Д д</i>	О о	<i>О о</i>	Щ щ	<i>Щ щ</i>
Е е	<i>Е е</i>	П п	<i>П п</i>	Ъ ъ	<i>ъ</i>
Ё ё	<i>Ё ё</i>	Р р	<i>Р р</i>	Ы ы	<i>ы</i>
Ж ж	<i>Ж ж</i>	С с	<i>С с</i>	Ь ь	<i>ь</i>
З з	<i>З з</i>	Т т	<i>Т т</i>	Э э	<i>Э э</i>
И и	<i>И и</i>	У у	<i>У у</i>	Ю ю	<i>Ю ю</i>
Й й	<i>Й й</i>	Ф ф	<i>Ф ф</i>	Я я	<i>Я я</i>

Here we can immediately recognize not only the familiar upright Russian–English homoglyphs known from past work (namely, the uppercase ‘А’, ‘Б’, ‘Е’, ‘К’, ‘М’, ‘Н’, ‘О’, ‘Р’, ‘С’, ‘Т’, ‘У’, and ‘Х’, as well as the lowercase ‘а’, ‘е’, ‘о’, ‘р’, ‘с’, ‘у’, and ‘х’), but also several cursive homoglyphs: *А*, *а*, *Б*, *б*, and so on. With a little further study, we can also make a number of more insightful observations:

- Not every letter that has a homoglyph in the upright form has a homoglyph in the cursive form. For example, the Russian ‘Т’ in its upright uppercase form resembles the English ‘Т’, but its cursive uppercase form, *Т*, does not resemble any English letter.
- Conversely, not every letter that has a homoglyph in the cursive form has a homoglyph in the upright form. For example, the Russian lowercase п in its upright form does not resemble any English letter, but in its cursive form, *п*, it resembles a cursive English ‘n’.
- Certain letters are homoglyphs in uppercase but not in lowercase, or vice versa. For example, the Russian ‘З’ in its cursive lowercase form, *з*, resembles a cursive English ‘z’, but the

<sup>1</sup>Note that there are no cursive uppercase versions of ъ, ы, and ь, as these letters never appear in word-initial position. The upright uppercase versions are used only for setting text in all-caps.

cursive uppercase form, *З*, does not resemble a cursive English ‘Z’ (at least, not the way it is written by most people).

- A given Russian letter may resemble one English letter when written in upright uppercase, but an entirely different English letter when written in cursive lowercase. In particular, the Russian ‘Т’ in its upright uppercase form resembles an English ‘T’, but in its cursive lowercase form, *т*, it does not resemble an English cursive ‘t’ but rather an English cursive ‘m’.
- A given Russian letter may resemble one English letter when written in cursive uppercase, but an entirely different English letter when written in cursive lowercase. In particular, the Russian ‘Д’ in its cursive uppercase form, *Д*, resembles an English cursive uppercase ‘D’, but the same Russian letter in its cursive lowercase form, *д*, resembles an English cursive ‘g’.

All these exceptions and anomalies point to the topic of cursive Russian–English homoglyphs and homographs as being something quite distinct from upright Russian–English homoglyphs and homographs, and therefore ripe for fresh logological study.

The first order of business is to list all the cursive homoglyphs and their upright English equivalents. Allowing for some variation in handwriting styles, we might settle on the following:

<i>A</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>g</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>e</i>	<i>z</i>	<i>U</i>	<i>u</i>	<i>K</i>	<i>H</i>	<i>O</i>	<i>o</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>c</i>	<i>m</i>	<i>y</i>	<i>X</i>	<i>x</i>
A	a	B	b	D	g	E	e	z	U	u	K	H	O	o	n	C	c	m	y	X	x

One might reasonably quibble with some of the choices here. For instance, most English speakers write a cursive uppercase ‘A’ more like an enlarged version of the cursive lowercase ‘a’ and not as *A*. However, the latter form is not an uncommon variant, hence its inclusion here. Perhaps the Russian *У* could have been included as a homoglyph of the English ‘Y’ for the same reason, though the Russian letter is written entirely above the baseline whereas almost all English speakers write the loop of a cursive ‘Y’ below the baseline. The Russian *Ш* and *ш* might similarly have been included as homoglyphs of ‘W’ and ‘w’, though in Russian these letters are always linked to the following letter at the bottom, whereas the corresponding English letters are almost universally linked at the top.

Given such a homoglyph table, an English dictionary, and a Russian dictionary, it is possible to search for Russian–English homographs. Below are the results of a semi-automated search for homographs of length 2 or greater, conducted in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd edition and filtered against the Russian edition of Wiktionary, the free online dictionary. Though acronyms and obsolete or archaic words have been excluded, many of the resulting homographs (in their English interpretations, anyway) may be recognizable only to subject-matter experts and Scrabble or cross-word enthusiasts. The homographs are listed in order of length, and then in Russian alphabetical order. A gloss of each Russian word is provided; note that these glosses are necessarily brief and so make no attempt to precisely translate the case of the nouns, the tense and aspect of the verbs, etc.

<i>ag</i>	hell	<i>De</i>	says	<i>Ky</i>	letter Q	<i>ox</i>	Oh!	<i>mo</i>	that
<i>am</i>	att	<i>Du</i>	letter D	<i>Ha</i>	onto	<i>na</i>	pas	<i>my</i>	that
<i>ay</i>	hello?	<i>go</i>	before	<i>He</i>	not	<i>nu</i>	pi	<i>xu</i>	laughter

<i>ax</i>	ah!	<i>Do</i>	before	<i>Ho</i>	but	<i>no</i>	along
<i>bo</i>	in	<i>za</i>	behind	<i>oz</i>	bank	<i>Co</i>	with
<i>Da</i>	yes	<i>ka</i>	letter K	<i>on</i>	oops!	<i>ma</i>	that
<i>ge</i>	says	<i>ho</i>	towards	<i>om</i>	from	<i>me</i>	those

<i>aga</i>	hell	<i>Don</i>	sidetrack	<i>nub</i>	drunk
<i>age</i>	hell	<i>Dom</i>	pillbox (mil.)	<i>nog</i>	under
<i>ace</i>	ace	<i>zag</i>	back	<i>nom</i>	sweat
<i>bac</i>	your	<i>kan</i>	mouthguards	<i>caz</i>	baglama
<i>bam</i>	waddings	<i>keg</i>	sneaker	<i>can</i>	saps (mil.)
<i>beg</i>	Vedas	<i>kun</i>	stacks	<i>cub</i>	grey
<i>bub</i>	woven	<i>kob</i>	intrigues	<i>cue</i>	this
<i>bug</i>	sight	<i>Hag</i>	above	<i>cum</i>	sieves
<i>bun</i>	VIP	<i>Ham</i>	nat	<i>cob</i>	owls
<i>bum</i>	woven	<i>Hem</i>	no	<i>cog</i>	sodas
<i>bog</i>	waters	<i>Hub</i>	cornfields	<i>coe</i>	soya
<i>gab</i>	given	<i>Hum</i>	nit (phys.)	<i>com</i>	cells
<i>Dab</i>	given	<i>Hob</i>	new	<i>cox</i>	ploughs
<i>Dao</i>	Dao	<i>Hoc</i>	nose	<i>man</i>	tap
<i>gam</i>	dates	<i>oca</i>	wasp	<i>mam</i>	father
<i>Dam</i>	dates	<i>nab</i>	fallen	<i>may</i>	tau
<i>Deb</i>	maidens	<i>nae</i>	share	<i>mex</i>	those
<i>Deg</i>	grandfather	<i>nan</i>	father	<i>mun</i>	type
<i>gub</i>	demon	<i>nam</i>	stalemate	<i>mux</i>	quiet
<i>Dub</i>	demon	<i>neb</i>	sung	<i>mon</i>	top (naut.)
<i>Dou</i>	milk	<i>neg</i>	pedagogical institute	<i>mom</i>	that

<i>baba</i>	pain	<i>kuna</i>	stack	<i>cane</i>	sap (mil.)
<i>bogy</i>	water	<i>kona</i>	sixty pieces	<i>cany</i>	sap (mil.)
<i>game</i>	date	<i>Hame</i>	here you go!	<i>Cuba</i>	grey
<i>Dame</i>	date	<i>Huma</i>	nit (phys.)	<i>Cuna</i>	vulture
<i>gamy</i>	date	<i>Hobo</i>	new	<i>coma</i>	cell
<i>Deem</i>	does	<i>Home</i>	note	<i>come</i>	cell
<i>Doze</i>	dose	<i>Homy</i>	note	<i>coxa</i>	plough
<i>Dozy</i>	dose	<i>naze</i>	groove	<i>coxy</i>	plough
<i>Doum</i>	milk	<i>nana</i>	father	<i>maze</i>	basin
<i>Doxy</i>	fur coat	<i>nace</i>	pass	<i>mazy</i>	basin
<i>Kagu</i>	burn incense	<i>name</i>	stalemate	<i>mana</i>	pan
<i>kana</i>	mouthguard	<i>none</i>	buttocks	<i>mama</i>	father
<i>kane</i>	mouthguard	<i>noma</i>	sweat	<i>meze</i>	thesis
<i>kama</i>	cat (naut.)	<i>cage</i>	garden	<i>mona</i>	top

*kame* cat (naut.)      *cagy* garden      *myna* dull

*begem* vedette    *cubeб* while having greyed

Some assorted comments and observations on the results:

- The longest cursive homographs that were discovered, *begem* and *cubeб*, are only five letters long. In Russian, the word *begem* (ведет) means ‘vedette’, a military term for a horseback sentinel, whereas in English (‘begem’) the word means ‘to decorate with jewels’. The Russian *cubeб* (сивев) is an adverbial participle that might be translated as something like ‘while having greyed’; in English ‘cubeб’ refers to a particular species of pepper shrub, *Piper cubeba*, or its berries.

By contrast, the longest known upright homograph [4] is the seven-letter TOKAMAK, meaning ‘an apparatus for effecting controlled nuclear fusion’ in both English and Russian.

- Only two cursive homographs have the same meaning in both English and Russian: *ace* (‘ace’) and *Dao* (‘Dao’).
- Two homographs actually have *opposite* meanings in English and Russian: *mam* and *mama* (tat and tara, respectively) mean ‘father’ in Russian but the corresponding terms in English (‘mam’ and ‘mama’) mean ‘mother’.

## References

- [1] David L. Silverman. “Kickshaws.” *Word Ways*, 6:1, pp. 37–52, February 1973.
- [2] Lee B. Croft. “Russian-to-English homographs.” *Word Ways*, 8:4, pp. 204–206, November 1975.
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- [5] Solomon W. Golomb. “Cyrillic that looks Roman.” *Word Ways*, 46:4, pp. 244, November 2013.